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SUBJECT: OLYMPIC GAMES: ISTANBUL 2012?

[11.](#) (SBU) Summary: On June 15, Istanbul formally submitted its application to the International Olympic Committee to host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. 8 other cities had also thrown their hats into the ring: London, Paris, New York, Madrid, Moscow, Leipzig, Havana, and Rio de Janeiro. Despite the fierce competition and continuing friction with the Istanbul municipality, Istanbul Olympic officials believe that their 2012 bid (their fourth consecutive application) is their strongest to date and that Istanbul has a good chance to be chosen as one of the finalists. End Summary.

[12.](#) (U) ALWAYS A RUNNER-UP? Despite having lost bids to host the 2000, 2004, and 2008 games, Istanbul Olympic officials are optimistic about their prospects for hosting the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. Like other would-be Olympic hosts, Istanbul faced serious problems in its earlier bids regarding the lack of sufficient venues and experience hosting international competitions. Although Istanbul was chosen as a finalist in 2008, Istanbul Olympic officials believe that political considerations made Beijing the odds-on favorite (in addition to the fact that the 2004 games would be in nearby Athens). This time, however, Istanbul Olympic officials are hopeful that their bid will be one of the strongest.

[13.](#) (U) THE MEETING OF CONTINENTS: Yalcin Aksoy, the General Director of the Preparation and Organization Council for the Istanbul Olympic Games, told us that Istanbul has two main advantages in its favor. First, Istanbul is not merely a geographic link between Europe and Asia: historically, culturally, and ethnically it brings much of the world together. The Council plays to this advantage with its slogan, "Istanbul: The Meeting of Continents." Aksoy also noted that no Olympic games have ever been hosted by a predominantly Muslim city.

[14.](#) (U) THE TURKISH OLYMPIC ACT: Next, Istanbul Olympic officials have a unique legislative instrument, the Turkish Olympic Act of May 1992, that guarantees the political support and resources needed to prepare for the Olympic Games. Specifically, the Act (approved unanimously by the Turkish Parliament) provided for the creation of a permanent organization and staff to manage Istanbul's bids for the games. Additionally, the Act devotes specific sources of revenue, including 5 percent of National Lottery proceeds and one percent shares of the Sports Lottery, horse-race betting ticket sales, and Istanbul Greater Municipality budget (totaling about USD 15-20 million each year).

[14.](#) (U) WHITE ELEPHANTS? As a result of this permanent staff (which Aksoy claimed is unique among cities bidding to host the Summer Games) and its financial resources, Istanbul has been able to overcome some of the problems it had with its early bids. According to Aksoy, at the time of its first Olympic bid, Istanbul had only one of the 33 sports installations required to host the Summer Games. Since then the Council has spent almost USD 200 million on installations, including an 80,000-seat Olympic stadium (costing USD 120 million), an Olympic Natatorium, and a 20,000-seat gymnasium. Plans are proceeding for an exhibition center and an Olympic Village. The Council has also worked with local sports organizations to develop experience in hosting international events, including recent European diving and basketball championships. Aksoy argued that given Istanbul's size and the local demand for sport, these venues will not be unused "white elephants." Istanbul will not build baseball stadiums or field hockey pitches until it wins its bid for the games, Aksoy said.

[15.](#) (U) TRANSPORTATION WOES AND THE CURSE OF OBSCURITY: Istanbul's main disadvantage is its weak transportation infrastructure and chronic traffic problems. The city's unsuccessful efforts to develop transportation networks to service the rapidly growing population would be a major problem in hosting an event as large as the Olympic Summer Games. Additionally, unlike London, Paris, and New York, Istanbul is not as well known among the members of the

International Olympic Committee (IOC). But new restrictions imposed after the Salt Lake City scandals that prohibit IOC members from visiting competing cities virtually guarantees that most IOC members will have to vote on Istanbul's bid without really knowing the city. Aksoy worries that their unfamiliarity and misguided impressions may imperil Istanbul's Olympic aspirations.

16. (SBU) FRICTION BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE COUNCIL: Another disadvantage, largely downplayed by Aksoy, is the friction between the Preparation and Organization Council and the Istanbul Greater Municipality. Although the Istanbul Mayor is one of the 13 Board Members of the Council, the legislative requirement that the city hand over one percent of its budget to the Council has generated significant tensions. Much of the recent tension has focused on the issue of transportation. Aksoy admitted that the Olympic Stadium's debut event last summer (a soccer match between former UEFA and perennial Turkish Champions Galatasaray and Greece's Olympiakos) was a "catastrophe" due to the lack of sufficient roads (Note: Local newspapers and soccer fans described the traffic into and out of the stadium as worse than Dante's Inferno). Due to the city's refusal to build new roads and despite the fact that the Council's revenues are not supposed to be used for transportation infrastructure, the Council finally agreed last month to let the city use a portion of its annual dues to finish the USD 10 million stadium access roads (just in time for Galatasaray to use the stadium for the 2003-2004 season while their own stadium is renovated).

ARNETT